

DCS Files Implementation Plan With Federal Court

Nashville, TN- Department of Children's Services Commissioner Viola Miller announced that the Path to Excellence Implementation Plan was filed today with Judge Todd Campbell in the U.S. District Court.

The Implementation Plan is a result of the Brian A. lawsuit filed in May 2000, which was later resolved by a settlement agreement in July 2001. In November 2003, the plaintiffs filed a motion for contempt against DCS and in December 2003, the federal court approved a stipulation resolving the contempt motion. A major feature of the stipulation is the development and implementation of the Path to Excellence Plan.

"This plan was created to provide the necessary structure to bring the Department into compliance with the Brian A. Settlement Agreement," said DCS Commissioner Viola Miller. "Governor Bredesen has been completely supportive of our child welfare reform efforts and with his input and vision, this plan was developed and it will bring about the changes necessary to provide quality services that will result in positive outcomes for children and families."

The plan focuses on desired child welfare outcomes and goals, which are driven by eight key areas with specific strategies and action steps. The following areas are identified in the plan:

- *Leadership and management*; which builds on regional competencies and implementing a standardized practice model.
- *Creating and sustaining a diverse and qualified workforce*; which specifies developing plans, and strategies necessary to recruit and retain a diverse workforce.
- *Child and family team meetings*; which focuses on developing and utilizing regional team meetings to make decisions involving the care and placement of a child.
- *Child protective services*; which specifies timely investigations, prioritizing response times and ensuring that children in DCS custody that are alleged to have been abused or neglected while in custody, have a timely, comprehensive and quality investigation.
- *Placement process*; which ensures children are placed in the most appropriate setting, with their own families and within their own communities, whenever possible.
- *Foster, kinship and adoptive home development and support*; which speaks to increasing the number of foster and adoptive homes.
- *Resource development*; which dictates contract provider accountability, and improvement in funding maximization and developing and providing appropriate services for children and families.
- *Quality assurance and continuous quality improvement*; which focuses on developing a system for quality assurance and ensuring quality data is accessible and utilized for positive outcomes.

There have been multiple accomplishments since Commissioner Miller joined DCS in December 2003. A core leadership team is now in place with members of this team serving as liaisons to the 12 DCS regions. The implementation of the Practice Model, a standardized guideline for quality social work practice that was developed as a result of the settlement agreement, has been initiated. Over 1,000 DCS employees and private providers have met with Commissioner Miller regarding the implementation of the Practice Model.

Over 1,000 kinship care providers have been approved as foster homes to children in DCS custody and a five-year-plan for the Independent Living program for older teens in custody has been developed. The University Training Consortium was created to support and expand the staff development resources for DCS staff.

"Developing the Path to Excellence Implementation Plan is just the beginning of our long journey. We have a tremendous amount of work before us, which is accented by a sense of urgency. However, the final results will be worth the efforts as we strive to make DCS a first class child welfare agency that provides quality services to the children and families in Tennessee," said Commissioner Miller.